

What we've heard from our readers

Letters & Comments

September 16, 2026

What we pray for

I appreciated Peter Marty's column in the September issue ("All we may become"). What struck me most was the paragraph about humans angling to get something from Jesus and using prayer as a tool for "doing or getting [instead of] being and becoming."

This has long been my lament about the prayers of the people in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's worship book. We pray each Sunday for God to improve the climate, the environment, the hearts of leaders, and so on. I feel we should be praying for strength and courage to improve the climate, to stand up for the environment, to speak up against tyrants and in support of those who suffer at their hands. "God's work, our hands" is a motto of the ELCA—so should we not be praying that our work shows more of God's love in the world?

—Brenda Morris

Winchester, VA

PAS or MAiD?

I recently said goodbye to two friends, one of whom I had known for 60 years and the other for only a few. My longtime friend included me in his decision to withhold medical treatment. His doctors told him he could live for months in the ICU, connected to critical care equipment. Or, they told him with great sensitivity, tubes and machines could be disconnected and he would die. "If this is my life," he said to his wife and me, "then I'd rather die." After consulting with his wife and two sons, that was his brave choice.

A brief time later my second friend, having been diagnosed with terminal brain cancer, told me he had chosen medical aid in dying. MAiD is legal in our home state of Delaware, as it is in 12 other states and the District of Columbia. After speaking with his family members, pastor, physicians, and a close group of friends, he made the same brave choice as my other friend.

Having supported these two and the decisions they made, I was particularly interested in the articles by Erik Hoeke and Lilia Ellis ("The future of dying?" and "The social failure behind assisted suicide," August). But I was disappointed when I read them. Their use of the term "physician assisted suicide" is misleading. In my 40 years as a pastor, I encountered many people affected by suicide; in these cases, the people who died did so without consultation with family and friends. Suicide and assisted dying are simply two very different things.

I was also troubled by the repeated references to the alleged ease with which people wishing to die in places like Canada and the Netherlands can access MAiD, invoked as a warning against access in the United States.

Interested readers can turn to organizations like Compassion and Choices for accurate information about the numerous safeguards that exist in places where people can legally choose MAiD.

I don't believe such a choice is ever easy or without moral, ethical, religious, and familial dynamics. Serious reflections and conversations about this subject are critical and will help prevent misuse by medical practitioners as more states pass important legislation about MAiD. The first step, however, is recognizing that MAiD is not suicide; it's a fundamental civil right.

—Bill Getman
Wilmington, DE

As a retired parish minister, former hospital chaplain, and hospice social worker, I found these articles to be flawed and misleading. To liken MAiD to a suicide death related to a treatable mental health crisis is misguided. To access MAiD, an individual must make a written request and go through an extensive process of qualifying. They must be examined by two physicians and found to be mentally competent, in the process of dying of a terminal illness within six months, well aware of other options, and able to self-administer a liquid medication. It is not euthanasia. None of this has changed in nearly 30 years of practice in the US. In other words, the US is not Canada, Switzerland, or the Netherlands.

My strongest reaction, however, is personal. My husband died of head and neck cancer after going through arduous treatment for over three years. He wanted to live and endured multiple surgeries, drug reactions, infections, and losses of function with equanimity, good humor, and grace. When it became clear he would not live, he had a frank conversation with his oncologist about how he might die, and some of the possibilities were very troubling. Bob wanted access to MAiD not because he lacked "resilience, fortitude, and faith," as Hoeke's article implies, but because he did not want his inevitable death to be traumatic and painful. Sadly, although Bob had excellent hospice care, the lack of MAiD access in our state meant he was denied his wish for a peaceful death.

There was no redemptive purpose in my husband bleeding out through his tracheostomy tube in the middle of the night, simultaneously drowning in his own blood and bleeding to death, while I did my best to hold and comfort him. Some forms of terminal suffering are not preventable or controlled by even the best of hospice care. In such a situation, the manner of death should be a qualified individual's choice. For my husband, MAiD would have been a divine gift.

—Mary James
Durham, NH

Lilia Ellis raises the question of social failure and PAS. Finland put this question to a committee and got an answer.

In 2018, our parliament rejected a citizens' initiative to legalize euthanasia. Instead, it appointed a broad expert working group to examine end-of-life care, patient autonomy, and euthanasia together. When the group reported back, it could reach no unanimous view on whether euthanasia or PAS should be legalized. But on the other question it confronted, it was unanimous. Palliative and terminal care should be further developed, access to them improved, the related expertise increased—and the law should be amended to further these goals.

Put the question to the people who know most, in other words, and they will divide about the dying and agree about the care.

I am a music conductor, and my trade has a term for what Ellis is describing. No one can hold a long note alone, so players are instructed not to breathe together. Each drops out, takes air, and returns while the others are still sounding. We call it staggered breathing. The line goes unbroken, not because any one person sustained it but because no one person was required to. It is not heroism; it is orchestration.

I descend from Mennonites, who had no state to appeal to and so assigned more responsibility to the congregation instead. What they understood, and what this essay affirms, is that endurance is a property of the group rather than a virtue demanded of the sufferer.

Whether one supports or opposes legalization, the prior question stands: What kind of society finds it simpler to facilitate exit than to make continued life bearable?

—David Woodard
Tampere, Finland

Berrigan's witness

Kudos to online columnist Mac Loftin for his sharp analysis of Daniel Berrigan, the radical priest and activist who helped generate the nonviolent movement of the '60s and '70s that resisted the Vietnam War ("Daniel Berrigan and the religion of war," online only). Today, with the war in Iran metastasizing, the Pentagon showing an insatiable need for weapon systems, and the acute impoverishment of people in the United States, the need to find alternatives to war is palpable.

As a college student in the early '70s, I was uncertain about what one could do to stop the incessant carnage of war in Southeast Asia. Yet the bold activism of Berrigan and his cohort regularly presented a clear rejection of the government's rationales for killing. It was as if the activists had taken a line from *Hamlet*—"The play's the thing to catch the conscience of the king"—and made it the driving force of their witness. Even though few of us might have been ready to exactly follow them—facing arrests, trials, anticipated jail time, and even fugitive lifestyles—their commitment could not be dismissed.

Fast-forward to today. Despite cogent reasons to challenge this country's military excesses and high-tech incineration of its perceived enemies, the current antiwar groundswell seems lukewarm. Loftin's timely piece recalls a person who was willing both to personally confront the war machine and to explain that machine as part of the "religion of war" that justified its human costs.

—R. Jay Allain
Orleans, MA

As a Vietnam veteran and a member of the Phil Berrigan chapter of Veterans for Peace in Baltimore, I truly appreciated Loftin's column. Each year in May, our VFP chapter gathers in the parking lot of the Knights of Columbus in Catonsville, Maryland, on what we believe is the exact spot where nine activists burned draft records in 1968. We are a small group, standing in a circle with our flags. We each say or read a little something—because I am a poet, I generally bring a Daniel Berrigan poem—and then we cross the street to stand in front of the public library, where there is now a historical marker for the Catonsville Nine.

There is something about this particular VFP action that makes it more important to me than any other I might join. Year after year, I just have to be there. I was struck by Loftin's point that those of us who oppose war must strike at its *religious* aspect: We must strip it of "its special moral status." Loftin has helped me to understand

better why the VFP Catonsville Nine commemoration is so important to me. I have written out his words so that I can turn to them should I falter going forward: “Christians’ best contribution to the struggle against war isn’t our numbers (not what they used to be) or our moral vocabulary (unconvincing to many and downright off-putting to some) but our technical expertise in things liturgical, ritual, sacrificial.”

—Madeleine Mysko
Towson, MD

Editors’ note:

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